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ABSTRACT

Issues in restructuring, based on the experiences of a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education, are presented in this paper. The restructuring of Minnesota schools could be characterized as movement from: K-12 to lifelong learning; ad hoc programs to a comprehensive policy for at-risk children; a few leaders to many leaders; inputs to outcomes; and monopoly to choice. Two forces at work in the education system are identified--administrative and market forces. It is argued that incentives and opportunities will produce faster, longer-lasting change than will mandates and regulations, and that choice provides incentives for school improvement. Two major challenges must be met for school choice to live up to its promise. The first challenge involves implementation, assessment, and evaluation of the triad of choice policy, consumer information and diversity of learning opportunities. The second challenge is for superintendents, principals, teachers, and boards of education to understand their new roles, responsibilities and relationships, to define them, and then take appropriate action. Radical followups of choice include teachers in private practice working as entrepreneurs rather than employees, and the creation of choice include teachers in private practice and the creation of new innovative public schools. A conclusion is that choice drives change, which provides greater learning opportunities for all children. (LMI)

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RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS: CHOICE

Article for Leadership Nebraska

by

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April, 1991

All us of who are educators are delighted that the interest in education restructuring continues unabated. Changes in teaching and learning are helped by the fact that we have the involvement of so many people who are not in education. Governors, legislators, foundations, business and industry, the media, Congress and the President of the United States, all want to help with the reform and restructuring of education.

Our educational system was great for the industrial age. We did a fine job of educating people to work in industry. Students learned a set of facts and procedures, went off to work, and made the United States the greatest industrial country in the world. But we're in a different age now, the information age, and we have to make changes.

Purpose of Education

We know that *all* children and adults must be educated. The first of three purposes of education is for the growth and the development of the individual; we've always believed in the individual in our country. Second, we must have education to develop citizens. Thomas Jefferson said to have a democracy the masses must be educated. It is only since we've moved into the information age that we hear a lot about economic growth as a purpose of education.

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All children must be educated so they achieve higher levels of learning. Students have to perform. The President, governors, and all of us are talking about higher levels of learning in math and science; communication, geography and history--a whole host of subjects. Different kinds of learning are also necessary. Problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and the learning-how-to-learn skills are not consistently taught, nor taught to ***all*** students.

How will we educate ***all*** learners so they achieve higher levels and different kinds of learning? By restructuring the educational system. How will the system be restructured?

"From-To" in Restructuring

When I was Commissioner of Education in Minnesota restructuring could be characterized by movement "from-to."

First, movement is ***from*** the school as the single delivery system *to* education in the community. Every week local newspapers carry stories featuring learning in museums, office towers, college sites, or wherever necessary to address the needs of learners.

A second way in which restructuring occurs is moving ***from*** K-12 *to* life-long learning. Early education programs abound. With choice, students are using opportunities to continue learning year-round, evenings, or weekends at postsecondary institutions or in conventional school settings.

A third part of restructuring is moving ***from*** ad hoc programs *to* comprehensive policy for children at risk. Children now have access to health care, good nutrition, and safe child care, as well as to education. Their families have new services across health, human services, education, corrections, and jobs and training which help them to become more functional.

Fourth is the movement ***from*** a few leaders *to* many leaders. School-based management makes it possible to have many leaders. Site decision-making with

greater teacher responsibility contains opportunities for schools to respond when students have the ability to choose their learning environments. Clearly, a lot of creativity is possible, if we give teachers the freedom to act.

A fifth way of restructuring is moving ***from*** inputs ***to*** outcomes. A major project on outcome-based education is being implemented in Minnesota. Focusing on outcomes of learning rather than inputs provides greater accountability. Each student can be recognized as an individual person with unique needs and aspirations as he or she progresses through learning outcomes.

The sixth area of restructuring is moving ***from monopoly to*** choice. The concept of parents and students as consumers of education became public policy. Parents are given a substantive role in the decisionmaking process. They can choose learning environments which match the educational needs of their child (Randall, 1990).

Administrative and Market Forces

There are two different forces at work in the education system: administrative forces and market forces.

The administrative forces of money and standards do not improve the system. Money is necessary; dollars may be reallocated and additional dollars may be needed. But change does not occur because of the money.

In some states reform of standards has been mandated. More student testing, increased curriculum, teacher testing, state takeover of deficient schools, and other input measures have changed standards. But improvement does not come through the administrative force of standards.

There is no way a state standard is a standard of excellence. The state mechanism of law and standards enforces minimums. If we want excellence we must have a mechanism that uses the non-political judgment of citizens about

what they expect of their children and of their schools, currently and in the future.

Market forces contrast with administrative forces. People respond to incentives and opportunities in the market. When there is competition from the outside change takes place inside. Consumers make judgments about schools which are effective and make decisions accordingly. Competition will stimulate the institution to improve its offerings for the students who do not move and to get the students who do move to return. To have an equitable system people of all income levels need to have the same choices.

Teachers, too, benefit from an institution which is subject to an incentive to maximize good teaching. Districts should be under pressure to respond positively to teachers who want to try something different and better. Parents and students benefit when districts are responsive to their requests. Public schools ought to be able to meet the competition of the innovation going on outside the system.

Incentives and Opportunities

Incentives and opportunities will bring change more quickly then mandates and regulations. The change will be longer lasting. Providing incentives for improvements in schools and school districts is the basic purpose of choice.

Choice gives parents the right to select the schools which their children will attend. Because choice substantially changes the education paradigm, the system is finding it must be responsive to parents and students, the consumers. As public education becomes more in tune with its customers, it will find that its role and structure will also need to change. It is this type of change which will have real impact on a broad scale. Because parents have choice, schools will more and more need to address what types of programs are needed. The "one size school fits all" will never work in the new education paradigm. Better information about the objectives of different

learning models will be provided so that parents can make informed choices (Wedl, 1990).

Choice will vitalize the school and open up the reservoirs of talent represented by the teachers. The possibility of students leaving gives teachers greater leverage in getting districts to approve the improvements teachers want to make.

The powerful structure of public education will bend. The basic system of education will change. Success for all learners will become a reality.

Two major challenges must be met for choice to meet its promise. The first challenge is implementation, assessment, and evaluation of the triad of choice policy, consumer information, and diversity of learning opportunites.

The second challenge is for superintendents, principals, teachers and boards of education to understand their new roles, responsibilities, and relationships, to define them, and then take appropriate action.

What Follows Choice

What follows choice? or what must accompany choice? There are a number of ideas and possible actions. The two most radical will bring the greatest change. One is the concept of teachers in private practice, teachers who want to work as entrepreneurs rather than employees. Educators who contract with school districts become far more accountable for excellent results. If their performance doesn't measure up, the district does not renew the contract. Private practice teachers could be invaluable to districts which want to be responsive to individual parents and to students who have special needs.

The American Association of Educators in Private Practice was formed as a non-profit association on June 16, 1990, to service the growing numbers of teachers and other educational personnel who wish to work as private business persons (New Organization, 1990).

The second radical idea is the concept of starting new and different public schools. The states would withdraw the local districts' exclusive franchise to own and operate public schools. Enterprising people, including teachers and other educators, could start new innovative public schools. Students and their parents would have choice not only among schools and school districts in the present public system but in a ***new system*** of public education (Kolderie, 1990).

Summary

Choice drives change--change which provides greater learning opportunities for ***all*** children. Choice makes it possible for ***each child*** to be in a learning environment where he or she is treated as a unique individual with unique potential. And where the limits of the unique potential are ultimately determined by the individual learner.

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